Spring 2013

Shadowlands

Kimberly Riner

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“SHADOWLANDS”

by

KIMBERLY RINER
(Under the Direction of Marc Moulton)

ABSTRACT

Shadowlands is a reflection on loss. By focusing on those who are left behind after a loss, I am able to explore the range of reactions associated with grief.

The artwork displayed in Shadowlands is an intuitive response to these experiences. It has been informed by research of cultural norms associated with mourning. By investigating specific ceremonies, rituals and interactions, I construct objects and installations that bridge the line between memory and memorial.
“SHADOWLANDS

by

KIMBERLY RINER

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Georgia Southern University, 2010

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

2013
“SHADOWLANDS”

by

KIMBERLY RINER

Major Professor:  Marc Moulton
Committee:        Jessica Burke
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DEDICATION

For my late mother, Connie Albers and my late brother Chad Albers.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

As a child growing up in Iowa, I was frequently sent outside to play. My brother loved to play ‘farm’ with his tractors in the dirt and would beg me to play. I didn’t really enjoy ‘plowing the fields’ he created though and I could often be found playing with the dirt. As a farm girl I spent time digging in the cornfields searching for treasures. I have memories of finding shards of pottery and cleaning and polishing them, considering them very beautiful. I recall a specific small ceramic bowl like form I dug up, polished, and put on our fireplace mantle as though I had created a masterpiece.

My parents were always supportive of my creative endeavors and allowed me to display my “artwork” throughout the house and yard. My mother strongly encouraged me to pursue an education in art. As an adopted child, I never knew much about my birth parents, but mother maintained the story that one of my birth parents was an artist. Confirmed that art was in my blood, I believed this story for most of my life, until recently discovering that is wasn’t true. Regardless, mom really believed I could be an artist and her conviction convinced my pursuit of becoming a professional artist.

My early education in art began in 1988 when I became an art major at Iowa State University, working only briefly in clay in my 3 Dimensional Design class. I was captivated by the medium but because of the unexpected death of my mother I withdrew from school. My hope and self-promise was that I would return. I didn’t realize it would take me twenty years to fulfill that promise. Naturally, within those 20 years, much has
changed, however the opportunity to return to school and pursue art as a career has brought me full-circle back to the world of art education and ceramics. Finally I had the opportunity to fulfill my dream and my mother’s wish for me.

When I returned to University in 2009, my first course was Beginning Ceramics, and I had an immediate re-connection to the medium of clay. The feel of the clay and the act of creating something from nothing is both spiritual and mysterious to me. As I began working with clay I discovered my ability as an artist to become one with the art. Such is an experience I seek to repeat.

The loss of my mother consequently influences all areas of my life including the direction of my artwork. I was twenty-three years old when my mother died—considered by society to be an adult—but I was still a child in many ways. My mother had been my best friend and her loss profoundly impacted me. The absence of my Mother’s presence during the many important events of my life, marriage, motherhood, graduation, and everyday living has left me with a constant reflection on the personal impact of my loss of her. These were happy events, yet something was missing – there is a void in my life from her loss.

To further complicate dealing with the loss of my mother, in 2010 my brother committed suicide. He was thirty-six years old. His tragic, unexpected death was devastating to me. I had, once again, lost someone extremely close to me. I have found that only the hope of one day seeing them again that brings me peace. The connection to a power greater than myself is what I supports and nurtures me. As my artistic voice was developing, I realized these experiences of loss would somehow manifest themselves in my art.
Therein lays the inspiration for this work. Loss is universal, everyone will eventually face their and their loved ones mortality. Yet, it is in finding purpose, direction, and hope regardless of the loss that I find most meaningful and beautiful. It is such meaning and beauty that I seek through my art.
CHAPTER 2

ARTWORK DESCRIPTIONS

My interest in creating installations out of ceramics began the first day of graduate school. This method for communicating my ideas that would encompass the environment with a material that has been used since the beginning of time to create utilitarian items intrigued me. Ceramics, while being very strong in certain contexts has a fragility that cannot be ignored. Using my personal history of loss, combined with my research of specific cultures rituals and practices of mourning, I use ceramics as a metaphor for life and death.

The supporting research includes studies of mourning and bereavement, in a variety of cultures. Many studies I found were done analyzing why and how some people process grief and are able to progress forward with life, but others are not capable of doing so and often have tragic consequences. My interest focused on why some people can move on and others cannot.

One study is the work of Dr. Viktor Frankl and his form of psychotherapy called logotherapy, which focuses on striving to find a meaning in one's life that is the primary, most powerful motivating and driving force in humans. I also met with Dr. Adrienne Cohen who teaches classes on Death and Dying at Georgia Southern University and she referred me to several cultures and traditions that have different spiritual mourning practices. While I read articles and books about many cultural practices, I was primarily interested in Jewish Shiva practices, the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead, and Judeo-Christian mourning rituals. Using this research and my personal history to guide
and inspire my imagery, I created the four installation pieces in the exhibition

*Shadowlands.*

The title of the first piece: *The Sun Also Rises,* references a famous Biblical passage about death from Ecclesiastes, Chapter 1:

> Meaningless! Meaningless!”
> says the Teacher.
> “Utterly meaningless!
> Everything is meaningless.”

> What do people gain from all their labors
> at which they toil under the sun?
> Generations come and generations go,
> but the earth remains forever.
> The sun also rises and the sun sets,
> and hurries back to where it rises.

In keeping with 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} century vanitas artworks, *The Sun Also Rises* references the fleeting and impermanent nature of our mortal life. The forms are specifically white to suggest purity and sacredness. The forms themselves represent bones or remains after we die and are suspended by red threads, which signify life and vitality. Black carbon completes the color iconography, black embodying death, sorrow and mourning. The color black also represents depths of the unknown, and encourages the imagination of a different world from that of reality. Color is used symbolically to represent life and death.

My choices of material also illustrate meaning. Clay is used to create the suspended forms. Clay itself is the earth, and we as humans are made of the earth, and when we die
we become of the earth again. Threads are used to hang the multiple forms, representing human destiny as controlled by a divine power, thus thread is a symbol of life. In Hinduism, for example, thread is the connector of this world and the afterlife. The carbon circle placed under the suspended forms was chosen as it is the material that all life forms on earth are created. Our bodies are almost twenty percent carbon. The cycle of carbon also represents the circle of life: we all will become dust again. Carbon is what remains after burning—after something is lost. *The Sun Also Rises* is also presented in a circular pattern for the viewer. This circle represents the circle of life, which is prevalent throughout artwork. Circles commonly represent unity, wholeness, and infinity, without beginning or end, without sides or corners. And finally, the viewer can also hear the symbolic nature of *The Sun Also Rises*, as there is an audible element. One must be close to the piece to experience the sound which chants an otherworldly chorus, and represents the ephemeral nature of life.
Figure 1. *The Sun Also Rises*, Kimberly Riner, 2013, Ceramic, Thread, Carbon, Sound. 14’x4’
In the installation *Material Drift*, I used fabric as a material to create undulating waves across the gallery floor. This piece was influenced by the Jewish practice of covering mirrors during Shiva, so mourners do not worry with outward appearances, but look internally and spiritually for their comfort. Traditionally, the fabrics used to cover these mirrors, usually a scarf or sheet, created an interesting visual of folds of gathered material that billowed down the flat mirror creating patterns.
The ancient practices of covering bodies in shrouds before burial also informed the creation of this piece. Shrouds are traditionally made from natural fibers such as cotton, linen, silk, and wool. Not only are these traditional fibers, but they also have been utilized for a very specific purpose. They break down quickly, and return to the Earth along with the bodies they cover. This practice informed my choices of using natural fabric, such as clothing that belonged to my mother and brother to create the piece. Typically, an undyed or bleached material is used for a shroud. This relationship to color informed my decision to use a white glaze on each individual piece. In addition, this choice also adds to the appearance of shadows and folds and relates to Shiva practices.

The process in which I created these pieces also reinforces my content. Using the natural fabric, I began by dipping each individual section into slip. This process is repeated multiple times and these layers become symbolic, as they represent life and the hardships and pains we endure throughout life. Next the piece is fired to temperatures allowing the fabric to burn out completely, leaving only the ‘shell’ of the fabric remaining, the burning signifying death and dying, and what remains of the fabric is a metaphor to me of those who are left to mourn the loss of their loved one. My choice of presenting the pieces elevated off the floor heightens the viewer’s experience to see the pieces as levitating. The installation itself creates an undulating wave that symbolizes the journey of mourning.
Figure 3. *Material Drift*, Kimberly Riner, 2013. Ceramic, Wood, Steel Rod. 24’x12’x4’
In *Artifacts of Memory* Day of the Dead imagery inspired many of my choices. In this Mexican tradition, skeletons and bones are commonly utilized within this celebration of life. I chose to include the Day of the Dead celebration in my research as it is a cultural ritual celebrating and honoring those who have died. Day of the Dead art is *designed for living people*, not for the deceased. Bones are commonly associated with this celebration and historians correlate the connection with ancient Mayan and Aztec civilizations, both of which used skull-like imagery in stone carvings and skeletal drawings. Sugar Skulls are given to children to commemorate this holiday, and skulls and skeletons are used as decorations for the celebration. I also drew heavily from the 16th and 17th century vanitas art where skulls are used to represent the certainty of death. Using this research, I created bone-like sculptures out of white earthenware clay.

My decision to hang the sculptures on the wall created non-traditional portraits of my late mother and brother. I chose the scale of the paper backdrops to represent their individual heights, but I was not interested in arranging the pieces in direct reference to the body. Instead I wanted the objects to be more symbolic and allow the viewer to see them as a representation of my loss.
Figure 4. *Artifacts of Memory*, Kimberly Riner, 2013. Ceramic, Glaze, India Ink, Paper. 74’x 66”x 12”
Lamenting (figures 5,6) was originally inspired by personal memories of losing my mother at a pivotal point in my life. I considered the many important events she has missed in the years since her death. She missed my wedding, the birth of my children and even the death of my brother. Using this as a jumping off point, I began research into creating a wedding/funerary garment to become a metaphor for these lost experiences. This research included reading a book entitled Not Just Any Dress, Narratives of Memory, Body and Identity. is a compilation of stories, and poems written by women in regards to special dresses and the memories associated with them. In the book, Carol Mavor describes Roland Barthes experiences after his mother’s death and the objects still around that define her. In his book Camera Lucinda, Barthes discusses looking photographs of his mother and how the objects in the photographs, including clothing trigger certain memories of her. He states:

“…my attention is distracted from her by her accessories which have perished: for clothing is perishable, it makes a second grave for the loved being.”

I created Lamenting out of individually cut ceramic flowers. I chose flowers to create the dress because I find the symbolism in flowers intriguing. In Victorian times the symbolism was used to send coded messages allowing individuals to express feelings which otherwise could not be spoken. Throughout history, flowers have been used to symbolize every aspect of the life cycle, from birth through death. For example, the fragility of life is symbolized by the flowers. To grow and expand, flowers require the proper conditions. The same is true for human beings. In death, flowers are used to
symbolize how the beauty of creation is temporary; as surely as the flower must be cut from the stem, so it is with human life. I also find it ironic that we send flowers when someone dies to comfort those who are grieving, but the flowers eventually die, a sad reminder of what they’ve already lost.

The flowers I created are based on Madagascar Jasmine, which are commonly associated with weddings and are typically white in color. Jasmine is often associated with the Mary the mother of Jesus, also grace, elegance, divine love, and faith. I chose to glaze and paint the flowers black to signify loss and bereavement. I used wire to attach the flowers together to give the dress form. I wanted it be an empty form, a void created in place of what might have been there. This symbolizes the absence of my mother, but the viewer can witness the emptiness and visualize their own loss. I place broken flowers and petals below the dress, in a circle, where a figure might stand, to represent the fragility of life and how quickly it can be taken from us. The dress, being made of clay, emphasizes this vulnerability, as clay is delicate and must be handled carefully.
Figure 5. *Lamenting*, Kimberly Riner, 2013. Ceramic, Wire, Glaze, Paint
Figure 6. *Lamenting* (detail). 2013, Ceramic, Wire, Glaze, Paint
CHAPTER 3
ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

In this section, I will discuss the artistic influences on my own work throughout graduate school. I will focus on the art of contemporary ceramic artists Lee Renninger, Jeanne Quinn, and Juan Granados. I will explain how the works of these artists inspire my artwork in both content and form. I will also illustrate how the work of contemporary artist Ann Hamilton influences my work in relation to a spiritual context. These influences will also serve to contextualize my artwork.

My early graduate work was heavily influenced by the 20th century modernist artists, such as Barbara Hepworth, and Ruth Duckworth (figures 7-9). This was evident in the contours of the forms, the coloration, and the inspiration drawn from natural forms, and the formalistic approach I took to work. I worked intuitively and searched for content as I created. This process, while fulfilling me as a maker, it lacked depth in content. As I have grown artistically and wanted to pursue more meaning in my work, I have kept the influence of these artists, but expanded my artwork to include installation pieces, as described above.
My first introduction to installation art was in a Dada and Surrealism class in undergraduate school. I was intrigued by the work of Kurt Schwitters and his ‘Merzbau’. (figure 10) His sculptural interior spaces that were primarily white in color, created interesting shadows, and completely took over his home/studio. He utilized primarily found objects, that he often took from fellow artists and plaster and wood to transform his space. He was commenting on society, in a slightly different way from his Dada peers. I find inspiration in Schwitters’ “attempt to make aesthetic sense of a world gone mad - a world whose moral values and social norms were in pieces.” (Schwitters) I strive to make beautiful work that does not point to the inadequacies of life (as so many contemporary artists do) but to focus the viewer’s attention on hope for a better tomorrow.
Lee Renninger

Lee Renninger is a ceramic-based installation artist who focuses on the role of women and fashion in her current body of work. She creates ‘ceramic fabric’ from hundreds, even thousands of small, individual, hand formed clay pieces to create larger forms. She builds quilts, rugs, dresses and afghans out of the small pieces she creates. Renninger’s primary medium is clay, but she also utilizes other elements, such as fibers, thread and furniture to reinforce her ideas, and the tactile nature of her work.
Renninger enjoys stretching the medium of clay beyond its functional history to use in both a sculptural and an installation approach. She states on her website that she treats clay antithetically, in opposition to its traditional, functional history:

“While clay is most often associated with fine craft and functional objects, I use it conceptually—stretching the boundaries of the material in an effort to challenge the accepted ideas of how clay should be used.”

In her series Bridal Suite, (figure 11,12) Renninger utilizes a porcelain clay body, which is steeped in tradition as a highly valued and expensive material. The use of porcelain informs her use of clay non-traditionally. She is commenting on the history of the medium and challenging the viewer to think about clay differently, while still paying homage and respect to its past.

In her Couture Project, (figure 13) Renninger once again uses many small pieces of clay to create ‘ceramic fabric’. She creates elaborate gowns with this ceramic fabric and fiber. This series was inspired by events in Renninger’s life. Renninger lived in an area that was dramatically affected by Hurricane Katrina. Amidst all the destruction of the hurricane’s aftermath, Renninger seemed to search for beauty in her work. In the documentary Define: Breach of Gravity, featuring Renninger, she states that she used her work to create something beautiful out of something horrible.
I am inspired by Renninger’s work primarily formally, and by process. I create installations using many individual clay pieces and united these small pieces to create a larger form. I am drawn to the use of simple forms joined together to make an impact on the viewer. I feel this process lends itself to installation work in a stronger way than individual sculptural forms. In a similar approach to Renninger, my work pushes traditional clay boundaries. My aim is to stretch clay past its conventional, utilitarian roots to create sculptural and installation art. I challenge the viewer to think about clay in a non-traditional manner through my sculptures and installations. Comparable to Renninger, my goal is to create something beautiful in my work, in spite of tragic events that happen in our lives.
Figure 11. *Bridal Suite Series*, circa 2000, Lee Renninger

Figure 12. Lace (detail), circa 2000, Lee Renninger
Figure 13. Ring Toss, Couture Project, circa 2000, Lee Renninger
Juan Granados

Juan Granados is a contemporary ceramist whose current work deals with grief and bereavement. The loss of his older brother provides inspiration for an ongoing series of ceramic platters. It has been said about Granados work that he has “transmuted his grief into clay”. (Kangas) Granados works with clay in a non-traditional manner. He is commenting on the history of the medium, as he is creating platters, but ironically these platters cannot be used in a utilitarian manner. His work preserves his memories of his migrant worker family through his use of rare photographs he applies with a transfer process. The platters become a frame for his childhood memories, literally and figuratively. (figure 14,15)

He connects his childhood as part of a family of migrant workers to his artwork. Granados states: “Clay allows me the total freedom to create work that shares its connections to my background and my experiences of working with the land…” (Kangas) While his work is about his family, it remains universal as it recognizes events that could happen in anyone’s life.

I relate to Granados work both in content and through his connection to the medium of clay. I was privileged to watch a demonstration by Granados, and later meet him at an NCECA conference in Tampa, Fl in 2010. His demonstration provided inspiration for me technically and conceptually. It was after this conference that I began considering using my personal history and the loss of my mother and brother as a source of
inspiration in my work. My background of growing up in Iowa and playing in and working the soil, informs my use of clay as medium of choice, in some ways similar to Granados’ history.

Figure 14. Trabajadores, 2007, Juan Granados
Figure 15: Refleq, 2009, Juan Granados
Jeanne Quinn

Jeanne Quinn is a contemporary installation artist working in ceramics. I respond to Quinn’s traditional practice in regards to making, but taking an innovative approach to the traditional material of clay. Quinn points the viewer toward consideration of the medium: not just the material nature of ceramics but also the medium's applications and history. For example, the physical properties of fired clay were highlighted by *A Thousand Tiny Deaths*, (figure 16) in which many black porcelain pots were suspended from the ceiling. These pots were traditional ceramic forms, suspended by an inflated balloon inside the vessel. As the balloon deflated, the pots fell to the floor and broke. The process, history, and fragility of ceramics were all addressed in this installation.

In her installation, *Everything is Not As It Seems*, (figure 17) Quinn created, in essence, a chandelier, out of many small ceramic pieces, that encompassed an entire room. In this work, Quinn comments on the decorative arts in an affirmative way, yet stretches the viewers to consider them in an innovative approach. Quinn states:

“‘I like to think of my pieces as Gesamtkunsthandwerks, in which I attempt to combine multiples that reference traditionally decorative objects into sensually encompassing installations. In the decorative arts of the past, as well as contemporary installations, the viewer becomes a participant in, and actually enters in to the work of art.’” (Quinn)
I was able to view this work in person at NCECA in Tampa, FL in 2010, and it impacted my work a great deal. Quinn’s work informs my work in an aesthetic nature, as well as in content. Quinn’s use of repetition of form and color provide me with a rich example. She also utilizes small pieces of varying sizes to create larger forms and installations. Quinn’s use of ceramic material as a metaphor in her work also informs my work. Her consideration of the ‘space between objects’ stretches my visual vocabulary, forcing my consideration of all aspects of the installation.
Figure 16. *A Thousand Tiny Deaths*, 2011, Jeanne Quinn
Figure 17. *Everything Is Not As It Seems*, 2009, Jeanne Quinn
Ann Hamilton

Ann Hamilton’s work investigates the spiritual and does this in an ethereal and elegant way. Hamilton uses performances, objects and installations to tell stories of the history of places, and the people that are connected to those places. Through these works she explores the spiritual realm, using all the senses to make the invisible, visible.

In my thesis work dealing with loss and grief, I am exploring methods humans use during the grieving process. In my personal dealings with grief, my spirituality played an important role in this process. Hamilton’s art informs mine in her investigation of spiritual concerns. Hamilton’s message isn’t entirely literal in context, and my most successful work is open to interpretation of the viewer. In creation of my installations, I continually think of Hamilton’s work, and strive for a balance in ambiguity. Hamilton’s presentation makes the spiritual palatable.

I relate to Hamilton’s work also in a materiality context. Her history as a textile artist relates to my use of clay in my work. Both have an extreme tactile quality in the making and the viewing. In an interview, Hamilton states:

“ My first making hand is a textile hand. It's more than a sensibility; it's a way of ordering and understanding the relationships between things.” (Castro)
In Hamilton’s installation for the 1999 Venice Biennale, *Myein* (figure 18) the artist comments on the history of slavery in the United States. Hamilton uses many different elements, sound, touch, and sight to interact with the viewer. For example, the use of pigment falling down the walls to the ground, then being tracked throughout the pavilion could be interpreted that we are all implicated by slavery, as it is a part of our country’s history.

In my work, I am incorporating different elements to support my ideas also. In The *Sun Also Rises*, I use clay, thread, and carbon. Clay, my preferred medium, reinforces the idea of fragility of life. The bleached white color of the clay body, could represent bones, or remains of existence. The thread used to hang the individual clay pieces seems to have a life, and could represent the thread of life. Humans are made of carbon, and it is what remains after we things die or burn.

Figure 18: *Myein*, 1999, Ann Hamilton
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

My thesis show, *Shadowlands*, is a reflection on loss. By focusing on those who are left behind after a loss, I am able to explore the range of reactions associated with grief. The significance of certain emotions and experiences related to bereavement can be difficult to articulate. The process of creating objects that are tangible, allows me to sort these experiences and determine meaning. In addition, I am also interested in the ways that I can evoke empathy and a shared understanding of loss from my viewer, especially since death and dying are universal.

My research of psychological and sociological studies has provided additional inspiration to glean my imagery. Through creation of ceramic-based installations I am able to both honor the memory of the deceased and allow the viewer to become immersed in the artwork.

In the future, I would like to determine new ways of refining my approach to ‘making’ as it relates to process and concept. I plan to continue creating installation-based artwork, but will also explore how sculptural objects may relate to my subject matter. Through executing my thesis work, I have gained both an appreciation for the creation of objects, but also how the artist must control the space in which they are showing objects. As a result, I am interested in exploring more site-specific spaces with my work. This will allow me to design pieces that specifically address the content and the venue.
REFERENCES


